DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 371 642 FL 800 780

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TITLE Issues in the Relationship of General and Specific Language in Workplace ESL: Some Australian Perspectives.
PUB DATE Apr 93
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization Regional Language Center Seminar (28th, Singapore, April 1993).
AVAILABLE FROM RELC, Singapore, 30 Orange Grove Rd., Singapore 1025, Republic of Singapore.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adult Education; Case Studies; Course Content; Curriculum Design; Educational Needs; *English (Second Language); Foreign Countries; Immigrants; *In Plant Programs; *Language Role; *Languages for Special Purposes; Language Usage; Program Descriptions; Second Language Instruction; Teaching Methods; Vocabulary Development; *Vocational English (Second Language)
IDENTIFIERS *Australia

ABSTRACT

A discussion of the content of workplace English programs for limited-English-speaking immigrants to Australia focuses on the proportions of general and work-specific course content in those programs. It draws, in part, on results of a 1989 study of one workplace English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) program. It is proposed that reasons for incorporating general English in such programs include: (1) the need for normal participation in workplace culture; (2) there are important linguistic relationships between general and specialized English; (3) learners may perceive a need for general English; and (4) to proceed further, learners may need to develop additional general English skills. Four specific instances of workplace ESL instruction that use a task-based approach are described briefly as illustrations of the value of combining general and job-specific language. They concern a course for hotel workers, another for employees in an industrial porcelain factory, telephone usage instruction, and interview skills for workers wishing to be promoted. It is concluded that developing skills in the general use of English, particularly through task-based activities, is necessary for limited-English-speaking workers to participate actively in the workplace, develop confidence, improve listening skills, and develop work-specific language skills. (MSE) (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse on Literacy Education)

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ISSUES IN THE RELATIONSHIP OF GENERAL AND SPECIFIC LANGUAGE IN WORKPLACE ESL: SOME AUSTRALIAN PERSPECTIVES.

ED 371 642

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(Paper prepared for RFLC Seminar, Singapore, 19-21 April, 1993.)

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PART 1. GENERAL AND SPECIFIC ENGLISH

Introduction

Strevens (1988) in naming some absolute characteristics of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) suggested that ESP could be defined as being in contrast to General English. ESP should address the specific needs of learners requiring English for particular occupations and activities, so that its curriculum content and language syllabus would relate to such occupations and activities. The argument of this present paper is that, if Strevens' defining characteristics of ESP are accepted, then workplace or vocational ESL programs, at least as they have been implemented in parts of Australia in recent years, cannot be regarded as examples of ESP. Ironically, this would be precisely because they have sought to address learners' specific needs! I will address this issue first and turn later to the issue of methodology, to be considered in the light of the demands of workplace programs. As a preliminary to the consideration of the relationship of general and specific English in workplace programs, I should give a brief description of the workplace setting in Australia.

Workplace Programs in Australia

For many years the Australian Federal Government has been funding the provision of English language courses for immigrants of non-English speaking background (NESB). Provision for adult immigrants has been implemented, at State level, through the Adult Migrant Education Services (AMES). An often cited figure is that about 20% of the Australian workforce is NESB. In States such as New South Wales and Victoria which have higher NESB immigrant populations the

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AMES instructors have had considerable experience in developing workplace ESL programs. The normal procedure has been that management commissions courses, funds workrelease and provides the classroom on site, and AMES provides the ESL instructor who analyses the situation, works out a program and then negotiates with management for its implementation.

In 1989 I completed a report for AMES, Victoria, documenting the experiences and achievements of its English in the Workplace section. Data was collected from workplace ESL instructors through questionnaires, and through in-depth interviews with 14 instructors which were taped and transcribed. Findings from the report are used throughout this paper. In the following section I summarise some general findings, in order to depict the setting.

Range of Courses

Courses were taught in a wide range of venues in the manufacturing industries, including the textile, food, rubber, metalwork and car manufacture industries. Service industries such as hotels, restaurants, and caterers were included, and also public sector areas such as hospitals, Telecom, Australia Post, the Transport Authorities and the Commonwealth Employment Service.

Learners could be new arrivals in Australia with no oral English skills at all, or long-term residents in Australia with minimal skills in English or speaking a fluent non-standard variety. For many years the majority of workplace programs have been developed for long-term residents. Learners' country of origin could be in Europe, the Middle East, SE Asia or South America, to name the most frequent, but the range of source countries is much more extensive than this. NESB employees differed in their educational background and training in L1 and in the amount of exposure they had previously had to English, both outside and within Australia. Thus, although there was a higher percentage of long-term residents in workplace programs than in other AMES programs, there was also great variation in learners and venues, giving rise to a wide range of programs. (Some details of variation will be seen in the section on needs analysis below.)

The Use of General English in the Workplace

In a survey of some 200 immigrant workers, Quinn & Wales(1983) ascertained that employees' language needs at work might involve English for the job, but that they also involved general English for being an adult in the Australian community, the workplace being one representative setting for such language. It is in fact a microcosm of the dominant culture. This finding has been corroborated many times through the observations of experienced ESL instructors analysing workplace English needs. As one instructor observed, many

managers see the need for general English if the employee's work involves contact with the general public. They do not, however, see that the workplace is itself a public place where English is the normal lingua franca and where employees need at times to be able to talk about topics other than work. A major reason, then, why general English needs to be included in workplace programs in anglophone societies is that it is needed for normal participation in the workplace culture. Taking part in workplace meetings of various kinds is an obvious example of such participation.

Alongside this overarching reason for incorporating general English in workplace programs, three specific factors of pedagogical concern need to be considered. They are:

- that there are linguistic relationships between general and specific English.
- that learners' perceived needs may include general as well as specific English.
- that learners' L2 proficiency levels may require general skill development.

These concerns will be treated in order of mention in the following sections.

General English and Specific English: Linguistic Relations

While certain syntactic structures may be more frequent in particular discourses - for example the passive verb structure in scientific or bureaucratic language - it is none the less the case that work-related English in its written and formal registers cannot employ a radically different syntax from that of formal English in general. Common rules of word order, and phrase and clause structure, and normal use of discourse markers must apply, if the text is to qualify as an example of formal English, comprehensible to native speakers. While the structure of formal English can be taught through the medium of work-related English, it is important for learners to know that the structure is more widely applicable, so that they can generalise their knowledge.

With regard to the lexicon, work-related English does, of course, often contain specialised vocabulary. This can be the technical vocabulary of whole industries, eg. car manufacture, or a particular terminology used in an individual company, sometimes formal, and sometimes local jargon. This vocabulary, and the phraseology which acompanies it, has to be learned as ESP. However, as with all technical language, work-related English contains much vocabulary that is common to other discourses. One example is the Dolch list of the 220 most frequent words in English. ESL instructors in the Victorian workplace have found it useful to have students learn the Dolch list

because, so it is estimated, these words constitute 50% of all print. Having automaticised this list for word recognition, readers are free to focus on less frequent vocabulary, for example the processing of technical terms. But is the learning of the Dolch list a process in learning ESP?

A second area of overlap in the lexicon is vocabulary which is being used with specific reference in one context, but is in fact a more generally used word with similar meanings in other contexts. Should the meaning of the word be explained with reference only to the specific context, or should the general use of the word be provided? In a language audit of machine setters, ESL instructors found that NESB staff had difficulty with a number of lexical items on the plans that they had to use. Some words that were little understood were outcome, prior to, discontinuous and capable of. While these words were being used on industrial plans, none of them were being used in a way which was inconsistent with the way they are used in other contexts. In fact, the instructor who went on to take a reading course with these employees used B. Facey's *A Fortunate Life* as a continuous text and found that a number of the words used in the work-related text that learners needed to be able to read (eg. achieve) actually occurred in the reader and could be learned or reinforced through that medium.

(It is surely through encountering a range of instances that we build the semantics of such abstract words in L1.)

The preceding discussion has been concerned with the relationship of general and specific English in terms of linguistic analysis and it has been argued that there are instances of overlap between the two in work-related English, such that it is hard to disassociate them in teaching programs.

We come now to the second pedagogical concern which has led instructors in workplace English programs to incorporate general as well as specific English in their courses. This relates to the issue of needs analysis referred to earlier, and to an often occurring conflict of perceptions.

General and Specific English: Needs Analysis

Where management commissioned an ESL course it was usually intended to be an ESP course, because a language-related problem had been perceived in a particular area or situation (for example with regard to safety regulations) or because language assistance was seen to be needed for the development of particular work-related skills. In many instances managers found it easier to understand that work-related language was needed by employees than that general English was needed.

Students, on the other hand, when asked about their needs for English at the beginning of a course often said, " I need everything." While inexplicit in expression, this reflected a sense of lacking a range of basic skills in L2, a sense deriving, perhaps, from adult knowledge of what it means to be proficient in a language and from adult experience of the difficulties that arise when such skills are lacking. As needs analyses were conducted further on in the course, learners were better able to define their needs more explicitly. The following description summarises many learners' needs as indicated in needs analyses conducted on courses and gathered together by instructors.

Generally speaking all students desired a greater fluency and independence in English, to be able to use what they knew confidently, and to be able to function in the respective macroskills at the same level as they could function in their first language.

With regard to aural and oral skills all students needed to be able to communicate both in and out of work. More recent arrivals needed to develop listening and speaking skills and density of vocabulary. Lower-level groups of all types required vocabulary for naming items at work and the language to report problems to their supervisors. Improved aural/oral skills were also needed for explaining, for requesting information, and for conducting telephone conversations with English speakers. Slang and idiomatic expressions were needed for initiating and maintaining daily conversations, as well as for participation in union meetings and quality circles. Different discourses needed to be understood for a range of situations encountered in or beyond the workplace, such as understanding the media, visiting the doctor or the sister, comprehending Australian lifestyles, attending interviews or dealing with authority figures. Intermediate level groups could often cope with English *for* their work, but wanted more general communicative skills as they looked for career development. Higher level groups needed an increased understanding of the nuances in English conversation, as they were required, for example, to socialise with colleagues and superiors. Finally, Vietnamese and other SE Asian immigrants often requested specific work on aspects of English pronunciation.

For many reasons, literacy skills were frequently requested. At the lowest level, there was a need to be able to read signs and notices in the workplace in the interests of safety. Some jobs required the ability to write memos and to take telephone messages. All jobs at some point require the ability to fill in forms. Improved literacy skills were needed in order to apply for promotion and also to perform the work of a promoted position. In addition, many learners just wanted

to be literate in English because it was part of being an adult in an anglophone culture.

The description just given of learners' language needs in workplace settings indicates that while managers and employees might have agreed on the need for work-related English, employees might well perceive a more wide-ranging use of the language in the workplace than managers, who as native speakers did not share the problems and as managers might never have witnessed them. Instructors, however, saw meeting learners' perceived needs as a crucial factor for the learning process, and so tried to incorporate the perceived needs of both employees and managers in the course, developing both a general and a specific component, and trying wherever possible to relate the two.

General and Specific English: Learners' Proficiency Levels

Instructors called in to teach employees how to read safety instructions or management memos, for example, would find that the learners' L2 reading skills were not sufficiently developed for them to be able to tackle the level of language required. (The same would be true of more advanced levels of learner, who wanted, for example, to enter a training course.) Lower level groups might need more developed L2 oral skills in order to tackle literacy. In short, instructors' experience was that it was very often not possible to teach English for a specific purpose without also teaching general English - because learners with low-level skills in general English lacked a basis for acquiring context-specific language. Most specific courses therefore took on a more general framework within which specific-purpose language was taught. A major factor in this situation was that sufficient time be given for courses, so that gaps in general linguistic competence in L2 could be filled, giving learners a chance to learn the more formal and technical language of their occupations.

Summary of Part 1

To summarise the discussion thus far, it is being argued that ESP in workplace programs in Australia, rather than being in contrast to General English, as Strevens (1988) suggests, has had to become a hybrid, amalgamating the two, in order to address workplace language needs as perceived by learners and managers. Two more general points have been made, the first suggesting that formal workplace discourse has linguistic overlap with other uses of standard English, and the second that the teaching of context-specific language requires a certain level of general skills in the language as a basis.

One may draw three rather different conclusions at this point. The first is that by Strevens' definition the workplace programs under discussion are not, in fact, true examples of ESP, because they do not

seem to fit the absolute characteristics. Another conclusion one could draw is that Strevens' definition of ESP could be viewed as prototypical, with individual programs being closer to or further from the prototype in terms of the number of characteristics they share with it. A third possible conclusion is that the constrastive picture of general and specific-purpose English in the definition should be abandoned, at least for workplace English, for the reasons described above in the Australian situation. At present I favour the last conclusion, and would add that one could, in fact widen the application to workplace language anywhere, not just in anglophone countries, on the assumption that the factors discussed here - learner needs, linguistic overlap and proficiency levels - would be relevant wherever there were immigrant members of the workforce who did not command the language of the host culture. Also, as indicated in Johns & Dudley- Evans (1991), the issues of the degree of specificity of ESL programs and of the relationship between General and Specific Purpose ESL courses continue to be debated across the range of ESP areas, not just for vocational English.

PART 2. METHODOLOGY IN WORKPLACE PROGRAMS

Introduction

Another issue which continues to be debated (Johns & Dudley-Evans 1991) is that of an appropriate ESP methodology. The fact that instructors in the workplace programs described here have had to combine general and specific English in their courses has naturally had implications for the methodological approaches they have developed.

Strevens (1988) left the issue of choice of methodology in ESP as a variable, rather than an absolute characteristic. Widdowson (1983), on the other hand, emphasised the importance of a distinctive methodological approach to ESP in keeping with the theory of language pedagogy that he was seeking to apply. Widdowson raised some relevant issues relating to the workplace programs under discusssion, in which both general and specific elements of English had to be incorporated and taught in a way which enabled learners to function normally as adults in the host community. I will therefore give a brief summary of some of Widdowson's arguments as a preface to describing some program methods.

Training, Education and ESP Methodology

Investigating the issue of whether and how to justify LSP as a distinct area of language education,Widdowson (1983) presented a theoretical model of language teaching in which *training* was distinguished from *education* , by having specified behavioural aims to which course objectives were closely linked. Training would assist the learner to develop a limited set of systemic and schematic formulae

(corresponding to linguistic and communicative competences respectively). At the other end of the scale, education would assist the learner to develop interpretative procedures for relating systemic and schematic knowledge to particular instances in speech perception and production. The ability to interpret in this way, eg. to make inferences, resolve ambiguities, make sense of or produce novel utterances is what Widdowson called language *capacity*.

He suggested that the pedagogical goal should not be to inculcate a limited competence, but to develop in students a capacity to use the language so that they could build their own competence and achieve their own purposes. The methodology which would distinguish LSP, viewed within this theoretical framework, was one which would activate learners' interpretative procedures, and stimulate problem-solving activities such as would be required in the learners' specialist occupations, these activities having been previously defined.

Thus, Widdowson sees methodology in LSP as needing to develop the learners' language *capacity* , ie. their ability to engage in interpretative procedures as described above, for their specialist areas. This argues for an educative, rather than just a training approach. If we accept Widdowson's view that LSP should be distinguished by a methodology of the kind he describes, we can go on to ask whether workplace programs can be seen as examples of LSP in terms of this view.

The Workplace Challenge

As we saw above, for various reasons workplace programs in Victoria have often called for the combining of general and specific-purpose English in the same course, with a consequent increase in the complexity of the relationship between aims, objectives and implementation. The challenge has been to help learners to develop language capacity, to use Widdowson' s term, in their L2, for both general and specific purposes. Most instructors have their preferred practices for teaching general English, but linking these to the language of a particular work venue is a demanding task.

To build learners' language capacity for use in the workplace culture, there is need , of course, for expertise in the language of that culture. It is a considerable task for instructors to collect the language of each workplace, especially where technical or idiosyncratic vocabulary is involved and also knowledge of the organisational structures and work processes. Long-term positions for instructors in single venues would be ideal, since this which would allow the instructor to learn the industry and to become well-known in the workplace culture. This solution has been very successful where it has been tried, but it is relatively rare.

Another way of achieving the expert knowledge of the culture needed for workplace programs is to use the workplace itself, in short to take advantage of the workplace setting. This involves harnessing the participation of managers, fellow workers or unionists to the point of conducting sessions in the program. In the next section I will describe some workplace programs in which the ESL instructor involved management on the course.

In addition, the descriptions will also show the use of task-based learning, leading ultimately to the achievement of a work- related goal. It will be seen that the activities fit Widdowson's definition of suitable LSP methodology, in that they assist learners to activate interpretative procedures of a kind needed in their work.

Finally, it will be seen that general English is interwoven with the work-related goals in ways that make the program more attractive and broader in its potential applications.

PART 3. THREE WORKPLACE PROGRAMS

The Melbourne Hilton

The first course to be described took place at The Melbourne Hilton. The training officer at The Hilton was interested in womens' issues and in imaginative approaches to staff development. She had become aware of communication difficulties and embarrassment that the domestic staff, most of whom were from Chile, were experiencing. The staff looked after the guests' rooms and frequently had to use the phone to get fresh supplies, of linen for example. The instructor, Margaret Howell, had the staff practise all the English they might need for making such calls, and then got the students to ring down to the actual person they would normally contact on the job. She also left the supervisors copies of the formats she had devised for the students to learn. When the staff came to the supervisors' desks, they would be assisted to practise the formats, and thus have their learning checked and extended. Similarly, when staff rang for sheets etc. the supervisors encouraged them to use the English they had been learning. Because of the involvement of the supervisors, the students received considerable practice, so that a 30 hour course was expanded to 90-100 hours. Although a short course it was remarkably successful, in the instructor's view because of the setting and support of the supervisors.

Nielsen Porcelain

Margaret conducted a pilot course at Nielsen Porcelain, a company which manufactured by hand the huge porcelain insulators that encase electric cables on pylons. There was a range of kilns in the factory and a variety of processes occurring as items went in and out of kilns. As a field of pottery making, the porcelain insulator industry

had a whole language of its own. Employees were from all over the world, and Margaret undertook a number of 36 hour courses whose purpose was to help increase the level of English in the workplace and to improve communication flow both up and down throughout the organisation. The classroom was in the middle of the factory and Margaret used this fact to engage in authentic language exchange. The students would learn, for example, the language of requests, such as, "Could I have some more clay, please?" and then the whole group would go out and practise their requests on the factory floor itself. Management was very co-operative and all employees in the factory became involved in the English learning task. Other courses were requested as a result of the program's success.

Telecom Programs: Using the Phone

Working for many years in ESL programs for Telecom, Margaret described two other instances of task-based learning using the workplace setting as a resource for 'authentic' learning activities. The first concerned the use of the telephone, a constant concern of the NESB employees, who needed to be able to use the phone, to deal politely with customers or to deal with emergencies, for example. In order to achieve these final goals, Margaret broke each one down into a sequence of tasks that were related ultimately to building up the skills needed to achieve the final task. On the journey toward the final goal much of what the class engaged in was for fun, on the grounds that language acquisition was facilitated when learners were relaxed and happy. Also, activities might be related to the acquisition of general English, or they might just as easily be work-related, such as actually phoning someone in the employee's own section. Much work was devoted to improving students' listening skills and their ability to double-check information. These skills were developed through sequences of lessons. She often embarked upon the sequence by having the group play a whispering game. As the message was whispered from one player to the next the information was often misunderstood or lost ,and in comparing the initial and final forms of the message, students had this point made clear to them. Margaret then taught them how to double-check a message and how to paraphrase information that had been received. She often used intensive listening activities, such as having the class break up into groups of three, where member A received a message from B and then reported to C. Member B could then judge the accuracy of A's report and mention points that were missed. Messages could be passed in both directions around the trio who could then judge how much had been lost in transmission.

The next phase involved role play of telephone calls, the students at first sitting back to back, using handsets. Thereafter, real telephones were used and, where possible, managers or other personnel were enlisted to phone in, in order that the exercise be as close as possible to the real workshop situation. In Telecom Workshops there were considerable communication problems because NESB employees were intimidated by telephone conversations in English, so tended to leave the phones unanswered. The development of authentic situations was thus particularly important because the employees' confidence that they could cope with the telephone on the job was built up through practising in a non-threatening environment with the very people they would encounter at work.

Telecom Programs: Interview Skills

Finally, Margaret recounted the teaching of interview skills to NESB employees who were contemplating trying for promotion. Her general procedure was to gradually build up the skills which would be needed for promotion through a sequence of activities. One such activity was to put group members in the "hot seat ' with the task, for example, of explaining what they might do if they found $20. The other group members then asked lively questions. Members being interviewed were allowed to "pass" on questions that they did not wish to answer. Margaret emphasised in these sessions the need to supply a more expansive answer in the interview situation. For example, it was not sufficient to state that you would pocket the $20. Some reason would have to be supplied. In this way she put some gentle pressure on the students to be more forthcoming in their responses than they might have thought necessary, because the interviewer would be looking for information and not just yes/no answers.

As the students got used to the interview situation, the sessions could turn to the kinds of issues and questions that would be involved in work-related interviews. At Telecom External Plant the management were totally committed to the program, so in ensuing classes managers sat down and worked out the probable questions that would be included in the promotional interviews that students would actually be undergoing in the months following the course. Possible answers to these questions were devised and all group members were given the opportunity to work through questions and answers, and to practise with their colleagues.

In the next phase the students went to the managers' offices where the real interviews would later be held, and three interview panels were set up with a manager and two students on the panel and another student as the interviewee. Solid feedback was given to the

students after this exercise. The managers then took the hot seat, were interviewed as if they were trying for the position and were also given feedback. The instructor felt that all these processes helped to boost the confidence of those who were later going to go for interviews. Activities were sequenced from those that were non-threatening towards more demanding situations. The activities themselves gave rise to discussion as students considered issues such as what it must be like to be an interviewer, and the possibility that interviewers themselves might be nervous, about their responsibilities for example or about their proficiency as interviewers. Cross-cultural differences in interview situations also came up for discussion, and the related issues of interview format and the weight given to responses. On this last point, for example, students needed to learn how long an answer should be given to a particular question, in terms of the question's overall significance. A technical question, such as, "What coverage of crushed rocks should go on a roadway when you are putting in conduits?" would not require as long an answer as a probing question of the kind, "Why should we give you this job?" which invited expansion.

With these and other activities, designed to be both challenging and stimulating, the learners were enabled to present themselves adequately for promotional interviews when the time came.

CONCLUSION

In the hands of a good practitioner, as illustrated here, what is a genuine pedagogical challenge has been the basis for the development of a LSP methodology which seems to meet Widdowson' s proposals very well. It builds the learners' language capacity with the workplace goals in mind, engaging them in appropriate activities that draw successively nearer to the target behaviour, both conceptually and linguistically. In utilising the workplace itself, and in particular the personnel with whom learners will be interacting, the instructor has ensured not only that maximum knowledge of the target culture is available as a resource, but that there is authentic communicative interaction in workplace language. In addition, the opening has been made for such communication to continue, allowing for learners' further development after classes cease.

Harnessing the use of general English, in discussion and in activities is seen as a crucial element. First of all, it gives practice in normal conversation in the target language, which is important because this is part of workplace life as we saw earlier. Secondly, practising conversation skills in class adds enormously to learners' confidence to use their skills outside class, and it increases their listening abilities, so that they can take greater advantage of the

language input which is available in the community, for example on television. Thirdly, it provides the possibility of much fun and enjoyment, which again has extremely beneficial effects upon the learning process. In terms of Widdowson's distinction between education and training and his view that LSP needs to veer towards the former, it seems that general skills are a necessary precursor or accompaniment for the development of language capacity in specialist areas.

There are many other excellent approaches that have been devised by English in the Workplace instructors in Australia. Those described here serve as an example of how general and specific aims can be interwoven in an effective workplace course. An interesting point is that the methodology seems to meet Widdowson's defining criteria for LSP delivery, while, as noted earlier, the curriculum content and language syllabus are of necessity broader at times than the defining characteristics for ESP proposed by Strevens would allow. This latter point seems to emerge in particular from the fact that language in the workplace consists of multiple discourse types (rather than a single discourse type) all of which need to be known for full participation in the culture. The constraint of multiple discourse types noted for the workplace may be applicable to other spheres of LSP. The issues of linguistic overlap and the constraint of learners' proficiency levels upon their ability to learn specialised discourse are, of course seen to be more generally applicable , involving as they do the nature of language learning processes.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I should like to pay tribute to the work of Margaret Howell, and to her generosity in providing the information used in this paper.

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